

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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R 170945Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9662
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY MANILA
AMEMBASSY TAIPEI
AMCONSUL HONG KONG
USMISSION GENEVA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SINGAPORE 0760

STADIS////////////////////////////////////

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SREF
SUBJECT: VISIT OF IRC DELEGATION

REF: STATE 38147

1. A FIVE-MAN DELEGATION FROM THE INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (IRC) VISITED SINGAPORE FEBRUARY 13-15. THE DELEGATION MET WITH HOME AFFAIRS MINISTER CHUA SIAN CHIN AND TOP OFFICIALS IN HIS MINISTRY ON FEBRUARY 14 FOR AN EXTENDED DISCUSSION OF THE PROBLEM OF THE VIETNAMESE BOAT REFUGEES. EARLIER IN THE DAY THE DELEGATION SPOKE WITH SEVERAL LEADING SINGAPOREANS AT A LUNCH HOSTED BY AMBASSADOR HOLDRIDGE, INCLUDING FOREIGN AFFAIRS PERMANENT SECRETARY CHIA CHEONG FOOK AND TWO MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT. ALSO PRESENT WAS FRENCH AMBASSADOR JACQUES GASSEAU, WHO HAS TAKEN A STRONG PERSONAL INTEREST IN THE REFUGEE PROBLEM. THE DE-
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LEGATION ALSO PAID A BRIEF VISIT TO THE YMCA HOSTEL WHERE THE REFUGEES IN SINGAPORE ARE HOUSED.

2. AT THE MEETING WITH HOME MINISTER CHUA, THE DELEGATION TOOK THE OCCASION TO EXPLORE THE PENDING GOS OFFER OF A TRANSIT CAMP FOR THE BOAT REFUGEES. CHUA EXPLAINED THE REASONS BEHIND SINGAPORE'S INSISTENCE ON "BLANKABLE GUARANTEES" BEFORE OPENING

THE CAMP. HE SAID THAT THE GOS FEARED BEING SADDLED PERMANENTLY WITH LARGE NUMBERS OF REFUGEES AS "HAILAND HAS BEEN. THE SECOND

MOST DENSELY POPULATED COUNTRY IN THE WORLD (AFTER HONG KONG), SINGAPORE WAS IN NO POSITION TO ASSIMILATE REFUGEES. NOTWITHSTANDING THIS FACTOR, SINGAPORE HAD OFFERED PERMENT RESETTLEMENT TO OVER 100 REFUGEES IN 1975.

3. THE GOS FELT IT HAD TO INSIST ON FIRM GUARANTEES BECAUSE IT QUESTIONED THE COMMITMENT OF MANY DEVELOPED NATIONS TO RESETTLE REFUGEES, CHUA CONTINUED. HE EXPLAINED THAT THIS ATTITUDE WAS BASED ON SINGAPORE'S EXPERIENCE AFTER THE FALL OF SAIGON IN 1975 WHEN ONLY THE U.S. AND TO A LESSER EXTENT FRANCE AND AUSTRALIA HAD TAKEN SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF REFUGEES. HE SINGLED OUT HOLLAND AND SWEDEN AS COUNTRIES WHICH HAD TAKEN NO REFUGEES DESPITE THEIR ROLE IN GENERATING REFUGEE FLOW VIA AID TO HANOI DURING VIETNAM WAR. WHEN SINGAPORE BEGAN IN 1976 TO REQUIRE GOVERNMENTS TO GIVE RESETTLEMENT GUARANTEES BEFORE IT WOULD ALLOW THEIR MERCHANT VESSELS TO LAND REFUGEES, THE NUMBER OF RECIPIENT COUNTRIES HAD INCREASED. COUNTRIES SUCH AS THE U.K. AND WEST GERMANY,

WHICH HAD TAKEN NO REFUGEES IN 1975, HAD BEEN OBLIGED TO SHARE THE BURDEN.

4. MR. CASEY, LEADER OF THE IRC DELEGATION, NOTED THAT FRANCE, AUSTRALIA, AND CANADA HAD ALL ESTABLISHED PROGRAMS TO ACCEPT
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LARGE NUMBERS OF REFUGEES. THESE COUNTRIES COULD ASSIST IN TAKING REFUGEES OUT OF SINGAPORE. HE STRESSED THAT THE IMMEDIATE PROBLEM

WAS THAT OF ENCOURAGING MERCHANT VESSELS TO RESCUE BOAT REFUGEES RATHER THAN PASSING THEM BY. A TRANSIT CAMP IN SINGAPORE WOULD BE MOST HELPFUL IN THIS EFFORT. ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE DELEGATION, RABBI TANENBAUM, SUGGESTED THAT SINGAPORE MIGHT ESTABLISH ITS TRANSIT CENTER AS A COORDINATED EFFORT AMONG THE ASEAN COUNTRIES.

5. CHUA, HOWEVER, CONTINUED TO STRESS THE NEED FOR FIRM GUARANTEES. HE POINTED OUT THAT THE GOS DID NOT ALLOW MERCHANT VESSELS TO ENTER SINGAPORE HARBOR AND CONDUCT THEIR BUSINESS WITH REFUGEES ABOARD AS LONG AS THE SHIP'S AGENT POSTED A BOND TO ENSURE THAT THE REFUGEES WOULD NOT COME ASHORE. MR. CASEY SAID THAT HE WAS NOT AWARE OF THIS PROVISION AND THOUGHT IT SHOULD BE MADE KNOWN TO THE SHIPPING COMMUNITY. EVEN IF MERCHANT VESSELS WERE NOT ALLOWED TO LAND THEIR REFUGEES, THEY COULD AT LEAST DISCHARGE THEIR CARGO AND CONDUCT THEIR NORMAL BUSINESS HERE. MR. CASEY BELIEVED THAT THIS WOULD PROVIDE SOME ADDITIONAL ENCOURAGEMENT FOR CAPTAINS TO PICK UP REFUGEES AT SEA.

6. DURING THE SINGAPORE VISIT, THE DELEGATION MADE ITS FINAL DECISION TO PROCEED TO JAKARTA BECAUSE OF THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT'S ATTITUDE. WE WERE ABLE TO ASSIST WITH INDONESIAN VISAS. EARLIER, UPON ITS ARRIVAL, WE PASSED TO DELEGATION MEMBERS THE SUBSTANCE OF REFTEL AND CONFIRMED THAT THEY WERE FAMILIAR WITH EARLIER MESSAGES ON THE SUBJECT. JUST BEFORE THEIR DEPARTURE, WE WERE ABLE ON THE BASIS OF A PHONE CALL FROM KUALA LUMPUR TO BRIEF THEM ON AMBASSADOR MILLER'S FEBRUARY 15 APPROACH TO THE GOM. THE DELEGATION EXPRESSED ITSELF AS DEEPLY DISTURBED AT THE MALAYSIAN ACTION. RABBI TANENBAUM DECLARED THAT HE FELT HIS CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AS AN AMERICAN CITIZEN HAD BEEN VIOLATED. HE SAID THAT HE HAD NOT YET INFORMED THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE OF MALAYSIA'S ACTION, HOPING THAT IT MIGHT STILL BE REVERSED, BUT THAT HE
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WOULD BE OBLIGED TO INFORM THE HOME OFFICE SHORTLY. HE EXPECTED THAT THE AJC WOULD REACT STRONGLY WHEN IT LEARNED OF THE INCIDENT, INCLUDING A PUBLIC INTEREST PROTEST TO THE USG, AND THAT WIDE

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SPREAD PUBLICITY HIGHLY CRITICAL OF MALAYSIA WOULD BE INEVITABLE. HE AGREED THAT EMBOFF'S EXPRESSION OF CONCERN THAT THE REFUGEES THEMSELVES MIGHT SUFFER AS A RESULT OF THE ANTICIPATED PUBLICITY AND SAID HE WOULD DO WHATEVER HE COULD TO MINIMIZE THE POSSIBLE IMPACT ON THEM.

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